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"Whoever Tells the Stories Defines the Culture"

Computer and video games are the fastest growing form of media in the lives of America's children, especially boys. They are also the fastest changing. The processing power of video game platforms has increased an astonishing 188-fold in the past seven months alone. The goal of a virtual reality experience draws ever closer.

Most producers of games are using this technological power positively to bring games to market that engage, challenge, and entertain. There is a sizable segment of the gaming industry, however, that produces games that feature and glorify violence and anti-social behavior. It is this segment, the "kill-for-fun murder simulators," that is the focus of concern.

My comments are about these violent electronic games. I will share new data from ongoing research we are conducting at the National Institute on Media and the Family. I will also put the impact of these "murder simulators" in a broader cultural context.

We are releasing extensive data to you today in written form. Let me highlight some of the findings.
- Many millions of teens are playing games—84% overall and 92% of boys now play.
- They're also spending more time playing games. Boys now average 10 hours a week.
- At-risk teen boys spend 60% more time playing games and they prefer more violent games than other teens.
- The knowledge gap between youth and parents about games is enormous. Only 15% of teens think their parents know about ratings. Only 2% say their parents routinely check ratings. Only 1% report their parents have ever prevented them from buying games because of the ratings. 18% of boys report their parents would be upset if they knew what games they were playing.
- The more time spent playing electronic games the lower the school performance.
- Teens who play violent games do worse in school than teens who don't.
- Youth who prefer violent video games are more likely to get into arguments with their teachers and are more likely to get into physical fights, no matter whether they are boys or girls.

The research on the effects of violent electronic games is in its early stages. The rapid change in technology makes the research task difficult because violent games are a "moving target," if you will excuse the pun. Research that is only four or five years old is only marginally relevant today because the games and the technologies are so different. We are seeing research results that justify the concern that brings us together this morning. I would, however, like to place research findings within a larger context.

Next month we will observe the anniversary of the tragic murders at Columbine High School.

We will once again confront the question, "How could this have happened?" As we try to sort this out, we have to address the major role media plays in shaping the culture today's youth are growing up in. I am not suggesting that video and computer games directly caused Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold's murderous rampage. I do not believe that it was their favorite game *Doom* that led them to load up their guns. I do believe, however, that media shape the norms and that influences the extremes.

No one will argue against the statement that what happened at Columbine High School last April 20 was extreme. Unfortunately there have always been and there always will be youth drawn to extreme behavior. But what qualifies as extreme depends on what's normal. If the norm is respect, then the extreme might be a verbal outburst, a kick or a punch. But if putdowns and "in your face" behavior is already the norm, then the extreme behavior is going to go farther over the edge. As our culture becomes more violent, then extreme expressions of violence will inevitably be more grotesque.

That's where the media come in. Whoever tells the stories defines the culture. That isn't new. It's been true for thousands of years. What is new is that during the 20th century we have delegated more and more of the story telling function to mass media. Computer and video games have become influential storytellers for this generation. As I said earlier some game producers take the storytelling art to new heights. Others, however, do not. They specialize in dishing out heaping servings of violence, mayhem, and degradation.

Today the average American child will see over 200,000 violent acts on TV alone by the time high school graduation rolls around. Who knows how many simulated murders they will have participated in if they're "playing" video games like *Duke Nukem, Doom,* or *Unreal*?

While the research linking violent electronic games with attitudes and behavior is in its early stages the research on other forms of violent media is so overwhelming that few researchers even bother to dispute that screen bloodshed has an effect on the kids watching it. What do we think the effect of a steady diet of video games like *Soldier of Fortune* could be? A fifteen year old boy sent me an ad for this game last week. It reads, "Each gore zone gets a different reaction to keep you from getting bored." In my judgement the most insidious effect of a diet of this kind of media is not so much the violent behavior but rather the culture of disrespect it creates and nourishes. For every Eric Harris, Dylan Klebold, or Michael Carneal there are millions of other kids who aren't murdering their classmates. But they're putting each other down, pushing, shoving, and hitting with increasing frequency all the time.

Games like these are redefining how we are supposed to treat one another--from "Have a nice day" to "Make my day." Too many of our kids are picking up the kinds of messages contained in the final line of the *Soldier of Fortune* ad: "Now the only question is where your next target gets it first."

A Cree Indian elder said many years ago, "Children are the purpose of life. We were once children and someone took care of us. Now it is our turn to care." We all—media leaders, game producers, and parents—can do a lot better job of caring.
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David Walsh, Ph.D. is the founder and president of the National Institute on Media and the Family, Minneapolis, MN. The Institute is an independent, non-sectarian, non-profit organization

dedicated to maximizing the benefits and minimizing the harm of media on children and families through research and education. Among other activities the Institute publishes the annual computer and video game report card each fall.